

Town of Wenham

Community Preservation Plan

Historical Preservation

Background

Wenham, originally referred to as Enon, was part of the first settlement by English colonists in Essex County, the first reported settlements occurring in 1635. Prior to European settlement, Native Americans likely inhabited areas around Wenham Lake, but no such ancient sites have been positively identified in Wenham to date. Wenham originally part of Salem, but on September 7, 1643, the Massachusetts colonial legislature incorporated Wenham as a town in its own right.

Wenham's landscape features and inland location helped to shape its history. The town's rural character, scenic roads, and proximity to Boston drew many residents to settle in town in the late 19th century until the present day. Residents value the rural small-town feeling of the community and maintain a sense of pride in its rich historical heritage.

Resources

Wenham lists 118 properties, dating from 1658 to 1970, in the Massachusetts Historical Commission's (MHC) Inventory of Historic and Archaeological Assets. In May 2005, citizens of the Town, in conjunction with the Massachusetts and Essex County Heritage Landscape Inventory Programs, issued a report calling for a systematic updating of Wenham resources on the MHC Inventory. That report, the "Wenham Reconnaissance Report," also comprehensively identified and described Wenham's historical resources (along with its open space resources) and made recommendations for the protection of those and other identified resources.

The Wenham Historic District Commission (WHDC) was established in 1973. It extends along Main Street (Route 1A) from the Beverly line on the south to the Hamilton line on the north.

The WHDC is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register listing of the WHDC specifically names three buildings within the WHDC: the 1662 Claflin-Richards House, the 1804 Dr. Samuel Dodge House, and the 1853 Town Hall. Seven individual privately-owned buildings also are listed in the National Register.

The May 2005 Wenham Reconnaissance Report, written after a year of study by a committee of eight Wenham citizens (in cooperation with Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation and the Essex County National Heritage Program) comprehensively documented Wenham's most significant historical resources. That report also gave recommendations for the long-term protection of those important resources, one of which recommendations was community passage of the Community Preservation Act (which occurred in May 2005). The publicly-owned and/or publicly-used resources identified by the Wenham Reconnaissance Project which theoretically might be candidates for CPA funding are:

- 1853 Wenham Town Hall, which the Wenham Reconnaissance Report specifically recommended be preserved;
- Wenham's ancient burial grounds;
- Wenham's scenic roads (Cedar Street, Cherry Street, Larch Row and Walnut Road); and
- "Memorial trees" identified in the Wenham Reconnaissance Report;

See Wenham Reconnaissance Report's Map of Open Space and Historic Resources.

Needs

Funding for preservation projects. Developers and market pressures are a threat to historic preservation, with property values usually far exceeding the economic value of the buildings themselves. There is a need for public education on the value of restoration and for creative incentives for developers not to demolish privately-owned historic properties. Historic town-owned properties, structures and landscapes usually fare much better, having the Wenham Historic District Commission and historical commissions to speak on their behalf.

Possibilities

Projects that have been cited by the Historical Commission, various other Commissions, Boards, preservationists and interested citizens are listed below. This by no means constitutes a final list, but shows the kinds of projects that are important to the Town and are in need of investigating.

- **Additional National Register Listings:** The Town's National Register List totals eight. There are numerous other properties that are worthy of being on the National Register.
- **Establishment of additional historic districts under Massachusetts statute.**
- **Historic Walking Tours:** To increase public awareness of the Town's history, the creation of Historic Walking Tour booklets has been suggested. These would accompany Natural Resource Commission booklets. They would include areas surrounding conservation areas and other notable historic sites. They would draw on Historical Society data, among other sources.
- **Preservation of Historic Materials:** The aim is to provide permanent protection for historical materials and artifacts that would be used for education, research and public benefit.
- **Property Survey Listings:** As recommended in the Wenham Reconnaissance Report, Wenham should update its inventory of historically significant resources, both for the MHC Inventory and otherwise. This inventory should include town-owned buildings, private residences, farms, churches, commercial buildings, and other places that meet applicable criteria of historic significance. This inventory should be ongoing with regular updates.

Goals

In order to meet the Wenham CPC's historical preservation goals, a proposal for the use of CPA funding for historic preservation must meet at least one of the following conditions:

- The property or place is on a State or National Historic Register or is eligible for placement on such a register;
- The property or place has been determined by the applicable historical commission to be significant in the history, archaeology, architecture or culture of the town; or
- The property or place is within the Wenham Historic District (or a future historic district established under Massachusetts law).

In addition, the property or place which an applicant seeks to have protected through the application of CPA funding should be either publicly-owned or open to public use.

Proposals may receive preference for funding if they accomplish some or all of the following goals:

- Protection, preservation, enhancement, restoration or rehabilitation of a historic, archaeological or cultural resources or other features of significance, especially those that are threatened;
- Protection, preservation, enhancement, restoration or rehabilitation of a historical aspect of a property or site;
- Encouragement of the use of historic buildings for affordable housing, while still maintaining the historic character of the building sites;
- Encouragement of the preservation of historic landscapes as open space;
- Enhancement or creation of a public benefit, and to the greatest extent possible, to include an educational (in the broadest sense) component;
- Serving a community need to the greatest extent possible.